# ZELIEN MONASTERY

BORINA

## BULGARIAN CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES

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# ZEUGEN MONASTERY

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*Zemen Monastery St. John the Theologian*

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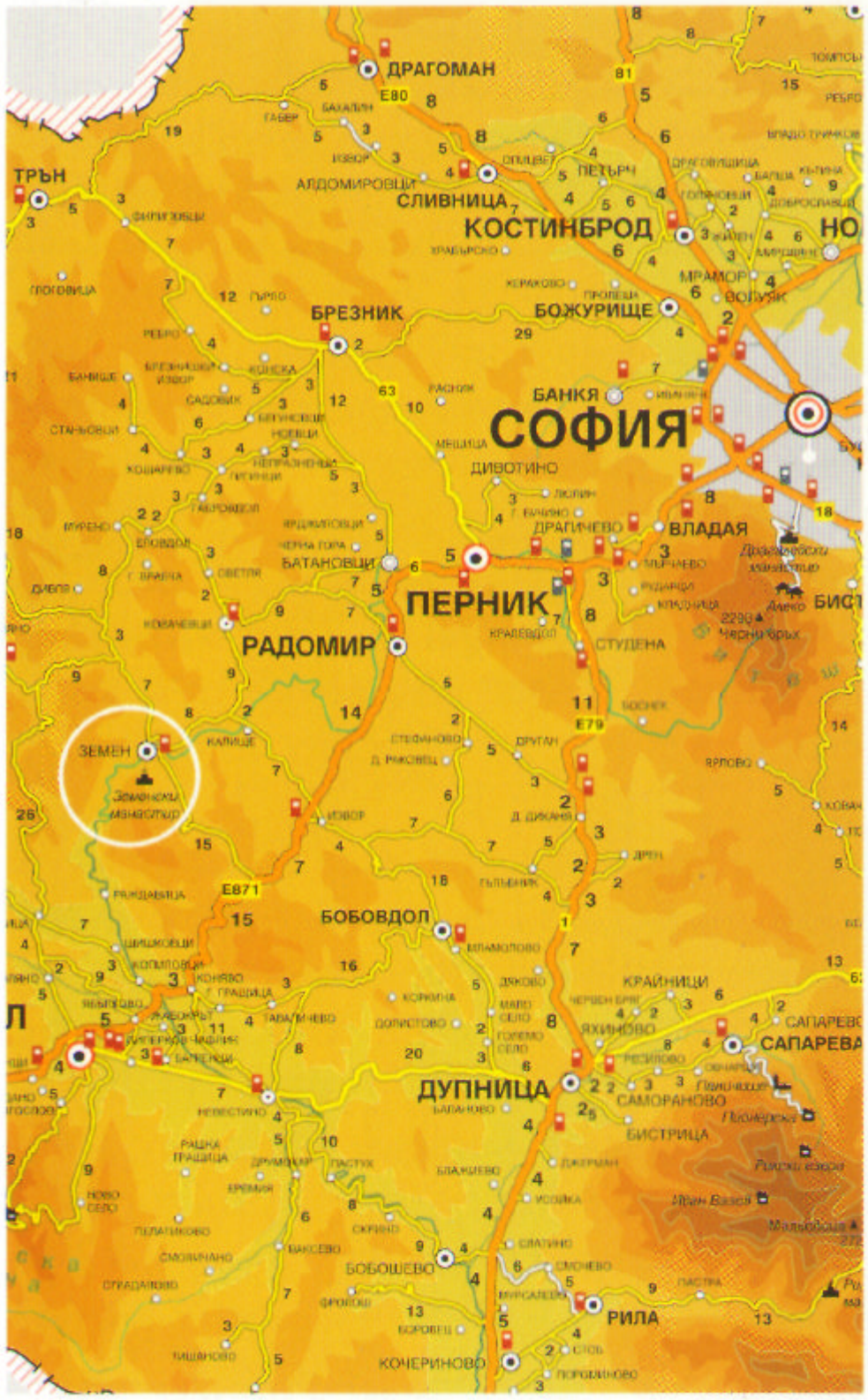
## LOCATION, NATURAL AND HISTORIC SITES

The monastery is situated in a scenic locality amidst the northeastern slopes of the Konyavska Mountains where the Zemen Gorge starts, on the left bank of the river Strouma. It is 70 km away from Sofia and 2 km southeast of one of the smallest towns in Bulgaria, Zemen, in Radomir district.

The town of Zemen is situated at an altitude of 590 m in the valley of the river Strouma. To the east the valley touches Mount Risha (part of the Konyavska Mountains), to the west it reaches the Zemen Mountains and to the north, the Rudini (part of Kraishte).

The Zemen Gorge at the river Strouma is deep and narrow. Interesting workings of nature, stone pyramids like Ritlite, Sarayat, Gulibinskite Skalni Grupi rise over the picturesque meanders of the river; karst springs spout (Haidushkite Izvori and Agapie); caves gape and the Polsko-skakavishki Vodopad is the most majestic of all waterfalls.

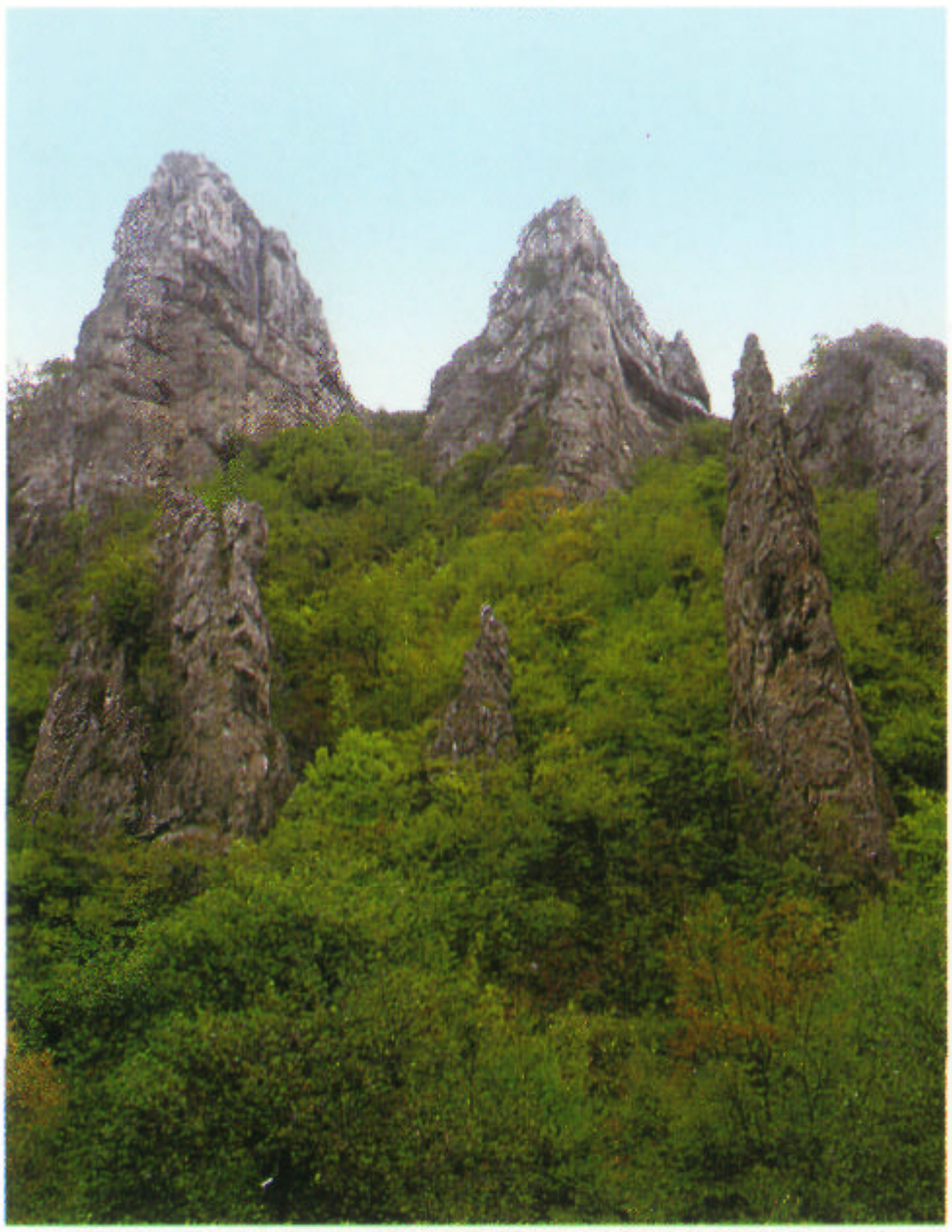
*Polska Skakavitsa waterfall*



*Zemlun Grad medieval fortress*

Zemen is a medieval village mentioned in records between the 11th and the 14th century. In 1330 the Velbuzhd battle that was a tragedy for Bulgaria was fought not far away from Zemen as mentioned in the annals of John Cantacuzenus, Nicephoras Gregoras and the Serbian archbishop Danilo. Before the battle the armies of the Bulgarian king Mihail III Shishman crossed the gorge in a campaign against the Serbian king Stefan Urosh III Decanski. The medieval fortified village had walls of hewn stone fused with mortar and occupied 1 hectare in a saddle nestled in the eastern slopes of Kraishte, over the right bank of the river Strouma and in the proximity of the Agapie Spring, some 4 km away from Zemen. The military strategic importance of the Zemen Gorge was recognized in Antiquity and fortifications were erected where Zemen is today.

A big medieval monastery existed some 4 km southwest of the town of Zemen, on the right bank of the river Strouma, in the Manastira locality (Manastirishte), and in the proximity of the medieval village Kaleto. The tradition is that it was Sveti Spas (The Savior) Monastery that the Ottoman invaders put to fire. The remains of the church still have traces of frescoes. The church is a recognized architectural monument of national importance. Remains of clay pipes used for water supply and covered with stone tiles and bricks have been discovered at some distance from the Manastira locality on the right bank of the river Strouma and some 4.5 km south of the town of Zemen, on the eastern slopes of the mountain. The pipes supplied mountain spring water to the



*Gulubinskite Skalni Grupi rocks*

medieval village and to the monastery.

The plenty of ruins from fortresses, monasteries and churches around Zemen are evidence of eventful history.

## *ARCHITECTURE*

The construction of Christian houses of prayer in the Bulgarian lands has a fine tradition. They were built in towns, villages, fortresses, and cemeteries and in the boyars' castles. Because of the vicissitudes of Bulgarian history throughout the centuries many monuments were destroyed and never rebuilt. What has survived from church architecture gives some idea of the magnificent Bulgarian culture.

The Church of St. John the Theologian is the oldest structure in the Zemen Monastery. It is a small cube, which is 9.18 m long, 8.71 m wide and 7 (11.20) m high. The building material is freestone, which is well hewn into blocks. Architecturally it is a cross-of-dome church with an inscribed cross and left without an ante-apse. The dome is centrally placed and supported by four solid pillars of masonry that have arches to communicate with the outer walls. The high cylindrical drum on the dome has two tiers of eight arched niches and four of the lower tier niches are shaped as windows. The combination of three arched two-step niches of which the one in the center is higher and marks the arms of the cross and the inbuilt brick crosses with arms of equal length that have an express decorative impact give vividness to the facades. The eastern facade has three semi cylindrical apses. The niche over the west-

*Plan of the Zemen Monastery Church*

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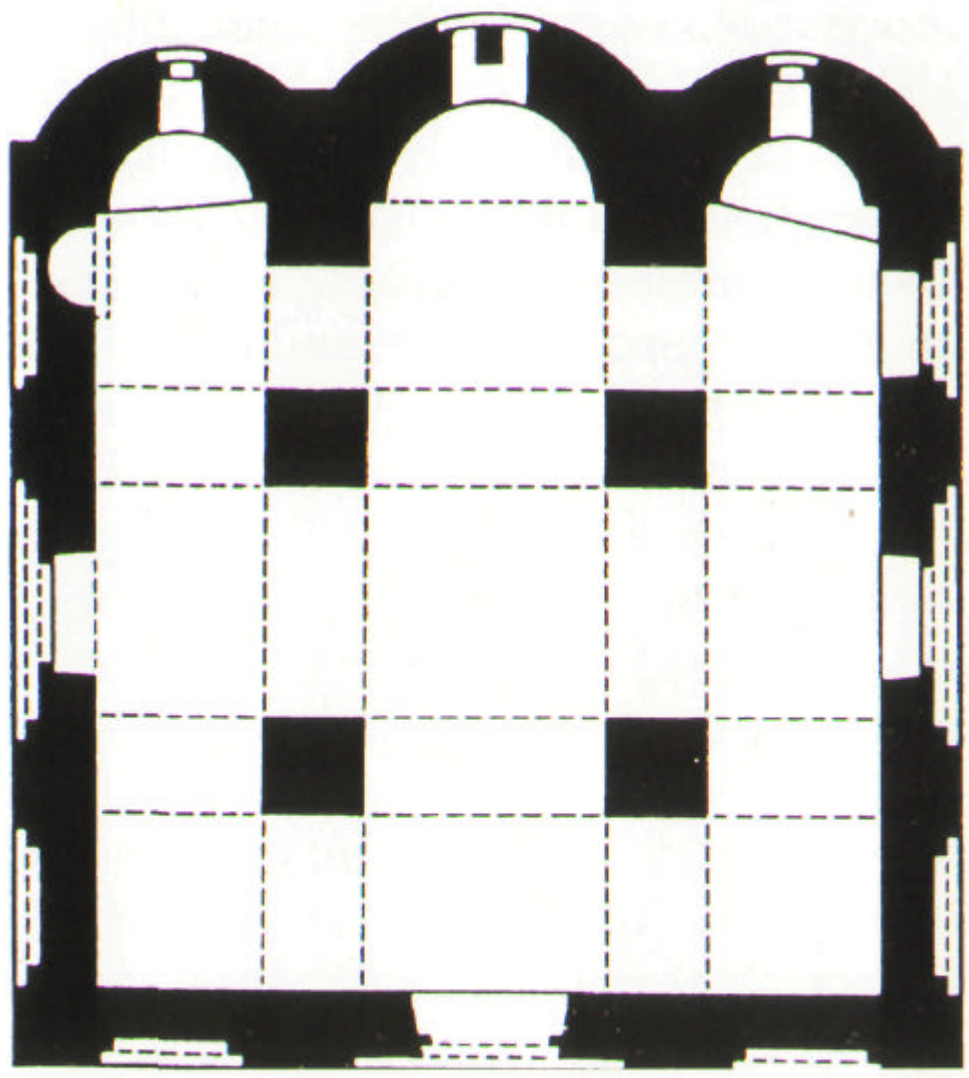

*Gulubinskite Skalni Grupi*

ern entrance depicts a bust of St. John the Divine (the favorite disciple of Jesus Christ and the writer of The Book of Revelation), holding an open gospel in his left hand. The construction of the church is dated to the 11th century.

The Zemen Church is one of the few surviving monuments of Bulgarian medieval architecture, construction and monumental painting.

### *PAINTING*

Fragments of the first layer of painting were exposed in 1964. Details of this layer were exposed when the monument was undergoing restoration in 1970-1974. Larger fragments have survived in the altar. The tympanum of the diaconicon features St. Ann and St. Joachim; the tympanum of the prothesis depicts presumably St. Constantine and St. Helena. The faces as preserved have wide open eyes and very expressive and individualized features. The frescoes from the first layer of painting are dated to the second half of the 11th century.

The monument owes its fame to the interesting architectural solution and mostly to the remarkable 14th century frescoes. The frescoes on the church walls match the architecture. The arrangement of scenes and portraits conform to the Christian church iconographic canon.

Christ the Ruler of the Universe (Pantocrator) transported by 12 angels that are in a partial state of preservation must have been painted in a medallion on

*St. Anna, wall painting, first layer of paint, 11th century*

the dome. Twelve prophets - Samuel, Aaron, Moses, Daniel, Eliseus, Elijah, Habakkuk, Isaiah and others - are depicted on the dome drum. The pendentives feature the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Jesus Christ impressed on a veil - Ubrus is depicted between the pendentives to the east; the Savior impressed on a tile (Keramion) is depicted to the west; angels are depicted to the north and south. There is a bust depiction in a medallion of Jesus Christ Older than the Days in the apex of the western vault and of Jesus Christ in Ascension in a medallion in the apex of the eastern vault. The southern and the northern vaults feature Old Testament prophets - Solomon, David, Nahum and some others.

The altar apse depicts the Virgin with Child on a throne and with two archangels. The busts of the four church fathers - St. Clement, St. Antim of Nicomedia - and another two busts in a very damaged condition are below. The central altar part (the bema) over the northeastern pillar exhibits St. John the Almsgiver and St. Leontius down to the waist. The northern wall of the altar depicts St. Spiridon. The northern wall of the bema over the southeastern pillar features St. Jerotheus of Athens and St. Alipius. The first tier of the altar apse features two angels and the liturgy writers St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great from the Melismos composition (The Veneration of the Offering) where the wine and bread are transformed into the blood and body of Jesus Christ.

Gregory the Wonderworker is depicted in full size on the northeastern pillar and St.

*Crucifixion, western wall of the northern vault*

Athanasius of Alexandria is depicted on the northern wall of the altar. The southern wall features St. Gregory the Theologian; the southern pillar features fragments of the portrait of the first bishop of Armenia, St. Gregory.

Fragments of the Deesis composition (Supplication or the intercession of Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist with Jesus Christ on behalf of the souls of the dead on the Doomsday) can be seen on the conch of the prothesis. The busts of the three hierarchs are under and St. Cyril of Alexandria and St. Peter of Alexandria are depicted in full size beneath. The lunette of the prothesis is given to the scene St. Peter at the Empty Sepulcher; the vault of the prothesis is taken by The Women Myrrhophores Tell the Disciples that Christ is Risen from the Dead. The two scenes are quite damaged. The southern wall of the prothesis features a bust of St. Altinoel and deacon Stephen below. The arch of the prothesis features the Old Testament patriarchs Melchizedek and Abraham. Archangel Michael is a full-size figure under Abraham on the northern wall. The waist-up depiction of St. Porphyry, bishop of Gaza, is on the arch between the prothesis and the altar to the east. Opposite to the west there is a bust depiction of St. Alopius. The full-size depiction of St. Gregory of Nyssa is beneath St. Porphyry and St. Gregory of Acragantha is opposite him.

*Dividing the Clothes of Jesus Christ, wall painting, 14th century*

The diaconicon wall features deacon Roman; the arch features St. Patrick.

The principal church feasts starting with The Annunciation cover the bents of the arms of the cross on both sides of the altar and moving from left to right. Next is Mary Visits Elizabeth on the southern vault. The scene suggests old Palestine and Syrian sources whereas the Byzantine iconography is unusual. Fragments of The Candlemas can be seen on the southern vault's western wall. The Baptism of Christ is on the western wall of the southern vault. The Raising of Lazarus from which the left half has survived can be seen on the western vault's southern wall. The Entry into Jerusalem is on the western vault's northern wall. The large number of children on the scene is typical of monuments from Cappadocia. It recreates a very old prototype. The western part of the northern vault features The Crucifixion. The presence of this scene among the Great Church Feasts is evidence of an earlier tradition as in the first half of the 14th century it occurred very seldom in the cycle in question. As usual The Dormition of the Virgin is on the western wall. The composition of the scene which is partially preserved is simple and laconic and in tune with the honored iconography. Part of The Ascension on the eastern vault has survived. The right part of The

*The Dormition of the Virgin, western wall*

Pentecost (The Holy Spirit Descends on the Apostles) on the eastern vault has survived. From the 14th century onwards that scene was painted on the walls of a church. Previously it was painted on the domes and vaults. In Zemen there is still one characteristic from an earlier period.

The Presentation of Virgin Mary to the Temple is depicted on the southwestern meeting point of arms on the tympanum over the arch to the east. The scene is in a state of partial preservation.

The next tier is a continuous frieze of the Passion of Jesus Christ starting from the altar with The Communion of the Apostles and occupying the vertical surfaces of the church in the third tier. These scenes illustrate episodes from the last week of the life of Jesus Christ and reveal his human aspect. The figures are larger. There is explanatory text from the gospel attached to each composition. The Christ from The Communion of the Apostles is depicted twice behind the altar throne. The apostles wear ancient clothes and sandals and are divided in two groups on either side and are depicted in differing postures. To the left is Apostle Peter who takes the bread; to the right Jesus Christ gives a jug of wine to Apostle Paul. The southern altar wall depicts The Last Supper, which in fact is the first scene from the Passion cycle. Jesus Christ is to the left,

*The Dormition of the Virgin, detal*

*The Ascension - detail, zenith of the altar vault*

holding a scroll in his left hand; Apostle John's head touches the breast of Jesus. Apostle Peter is in the far right end of the table. The apostles sit at a semi round table. This composition was typical of 13th century Bulgarian art but was an exception in the 14th century as usually Jesus Christ stood in the center of the composition. The Washing of the Feet is on the eastern wall of the southern cross arm. The composition of the scene relates to the Syrian and Cappadocian type. Christ speaks to the apostles right of this scene on the same wall. The Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane is on the southern wall in the third tier, flanking a small window structure. The left half depicts the apostles who sleep in a sitting posture on a sloping hill; the right half depicts Jesus Christ who stands and holds a scroll in his left hand and speaks with the sitting Apostle Peter. Another two images of Jesus Christ are seen over the hill, to the right where he touches his breast and to the left where he is painted with hands in prayer on his bended knees and looks at the ray

*Pontius Pilate Judges (second scene) - detail, Pilate, wall painting, 14th century*

*Communion of the Apostles - detail, wall painting, 14th century*

issuing from the upper left corner. An angel in an ancient robe is behind Jesus Christ and touches him. The iconography of this scene is based on archaic sources. Judas before the High Priests on the southern cross arm's western wall is a partially surviving composition. The Betrayal of Judas is to the right. The central part of the composition depicts Jesus Christ who touches Malchus to heal him and holds a scroll in his left hand. Judas comes from the right direction with outstretching arms. The soldier to the right of Jesus Christ holds his arm and points his sword at him. There is a multitude of Jews with rods and torches behind Jesus Christ. The right part of the composition shows Apostle Peter who holds a sword to smite Malchus and about to cut off his ear, which is in the clutch of his left hand. The composition Jesus Christ before the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas is on the southern wall in the western cross arm. The left-side part has survived. The wrists of Jesus Christ are tied in front. A servant behind has his right arm high above his head; a Pharisee behind him presses his hands to his breast. The multitude is depicted in the Eastern manner of execution that is characteristic of Zemen. Pontius Pilate Judges (first scene - The Washing of the Hands) is a composition on the northern wall of the western cross arm and is one of the key episodes in The Passion cycle. The Denial of Peter is between the two scenes of the composition Pontius Pilate Judges. It is a depiction of

*Communion of the Apostles - detail, wall painting, 14th century*

the three denials. The Weeping Apostle Peter is on the northern cross arm's western wall. Apostle Peter is in the forefront, bending and resting his left hand on a column; he cups his cheek in his right hand; his face is careworn. The scene above him shows a cock whose crow heralds the night is over. Pontius Pilate Judges (second scene) is right of The Weeping Apostle Peter. That scene occurs seldom in monumental paintings outside the Balkans. The Mockery of Jesus Christ is to the right. The lower left corner presents two small figures: the one wears a short red tunic and holds cymbals; the other is a dancer who squats with raised hands and looks to the right. Part of a standing figure beating a drum can be seen behind them. Christ was depicted behind these small figures. The northern wall depicts The Bearing of the Cross with Simon of Cyrene who bears the cross on his shoulder in the foreground. A soldier behind him holds the end of the rope with which the wrists of Jesus Christ are tied. Virgin Mary is in the foreground and beyond a hill and stretches her arms to her son. The ancient garments of Jesus Christ, the presence of Virgin Mary and of Simon of Cyrene with a halo and the cross on his shoulder can be defined as elements coming from Cappadocia. The Making of the Cross and Jesus Christ Refuses to Drink from the Spunge of Vinegar are on the northern wall. The Mounting of the Cross is on the eastern wall over the entrance to the prothesis. The right half of the scene based on texts from

*Jesus Christ before the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas, southern wall in the western cross arm*

the Apocrypha that are not incorporated in the Gospels is preserved. The Parting of Garments is next to The Mounting of the Cross. Soldiers wearing short tunics sit around the garments of Jesus Christ against the background of a hill. A servant with a

*Forging the Nails for the Cross, wall painting, 14th century*

basket full of nails is behind the soldiers. Forging the Nails for the Cross is before The Parting of Garments. The scene is original in terms of concept and genre. Three blacksmiths and a woman stand around an anvil and a furnace. The implements are very realistic. The artist's sense for reality is manifest in the details that illustrate the contemporary ways and milieu. The origin of this iconography is Eastern.

The Passion tier caps a continuous freeze of waist-high depictions of saints and martyrs. The frieze makes a circle of the interior of the church. The presence of such a frieze is evidence of time-honored tradition. The depictions include the Forty Martyrs of Sebastea that is a recurrent scene in medieval monuments. In 1230 King Ivan Assen II dedicated a church to them in the royal city of Turnovo. The faces on the four dome pillars are in a best state of preservation. St. Severianus on the southern wall, St. Sisinius on the northern wall, St. Heraclius who is next to St. Miron on the northern wall of the southwestern pillar, St. Flavius and St. Acacius on the southern wall of the northwestern pillar opposite them are wholly or partially preserved. The eastern wall left and right of the central apse presents St. Joachim and St. Ann, St. Zechariah and St. Elizabeth. St. Xanthus on the southern arch over the donors is an interesting depiction. St. Athanasius who is painted above St. John of Rila is also in a good state of preservation.

*Portrait of donor Deyan, detail*

The bottom comprises walls and pillars featuring almost life-size saints, monks, fathers of the church and donors.

Portraits of donors in the southwestern corner of the church amidst the tier of standing saints have survived, four on the southern wall and two on the western wall. An elderly man, his wife Doya and his son and daughter are depicted on the southern wall to the right of the window structure. The extant and partly legible donors' text is over. The elderly donor has white straight hair, round face, gray forking short beard and calm thoughtful eyes. His name has perished, as has the left and lower part of the portrait. Formally he is called despot Deyan. His wife Doya to the right of him is a young woman with a gentle oval face and arched eyebrows. Her headdress is very unique: it is a top hat on white veil and with sequins. The boy to the

*Portrait of Donor Doya, detail*

right of Doya is badly damaged just as is the young woman next to him. Nothing has survived from her face. The big fan-shaped earrings of gold are rendered in very great detail. The western wall depicts portraits of other donors: Vitomir is a young man with short straight auburn beard and moustache; Stayu is a boy with cropped hair. Both portraits are badly damaged. The portraits of donors in Zemen rank among the earliest portraits of Bulgarian boyars and their historical, artistic and ethnographic value is great.

The portraits of the apostles Paul and Peter on the eastern wall of the southwestern and northwestern pillar are very interesting and well preserved. Paul who is thoughtful is most impressive from among the lower tier portraits.

St. Theodore Stratilates on the southern

*Donors, detail, part of the heads and donors' inscription*

wall of the northwestern pillar wears a cuirass and a cloak and holds a shield and a long spear. He is a young man with a broad face and curly auburn hair; his beard is forked (which is probably an Eastern, Syrian fashion).

St. John of Rila on the southern face of the southwestern pillar opposite the donors is a stylized portrait of an old man with white hair and beard, lost in his thoughts and with calm eyes. This is one of the earliest extant portraits of the Bulgarian saint who founded the Rila Monastery.

St. Joachim of Sarandopor on the western face of the southwestern pillar, St. Nestorius on the northern face of the northwestern pillar, St. Procopius on the western face of the northwestern pillar are all in a state of partial preservation. Four monks again in a state of partial preservation are depicted right of the door on the western wall: St. Sabas of Jerusalem, St. Arsenius, St. Euthymius. The western wall depicts three full-size female saints fragments of which have survived: St. Varvara, St. Nedelya.

The painter who painted most of the single portraits in the two lower tiers must have painted the portraits of the donors. All frescoes in the church fall into one and the same style. All texts are in Middle Bulgarian.

The iconographic patterns of the Great Church Feasts are of Eastern origin predominantly (originating from Syria and Palestine). The iconography of The Passion is to be attributed even to an earlier period, the Pre-iconoclastic Period of

*St. John of Rila, wall painting, 14th century*

*The Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (detail), 14th century*

*St. Theodore Stratilates, wall painting, 14th century*

Byzantine art. The Zemen master was related to the old tradition that exhibits very old Eastern influences. The frescoes are dated to the first quarter of the 14th century. Their original style is very much different from that of the monuments in the capital Turnovo and in Constantinople. The master had a very powerful feeling for decoration and his colors are gay and down to earth, free of intricate nuances. The bright colors give the frescoes their powerful impact. Line and two-dimensional perspective distinguish the paintings. The figures from the first two tiers are static and in full-face depiction whereas those from The Passion Week cycle are in a variety of statures and more lively. The compositions and the arrangement of portraits are based on symmetry. The scenes gravitate around a central figure, usually Jesus Christ. The Great Church Feasts were painted probably by

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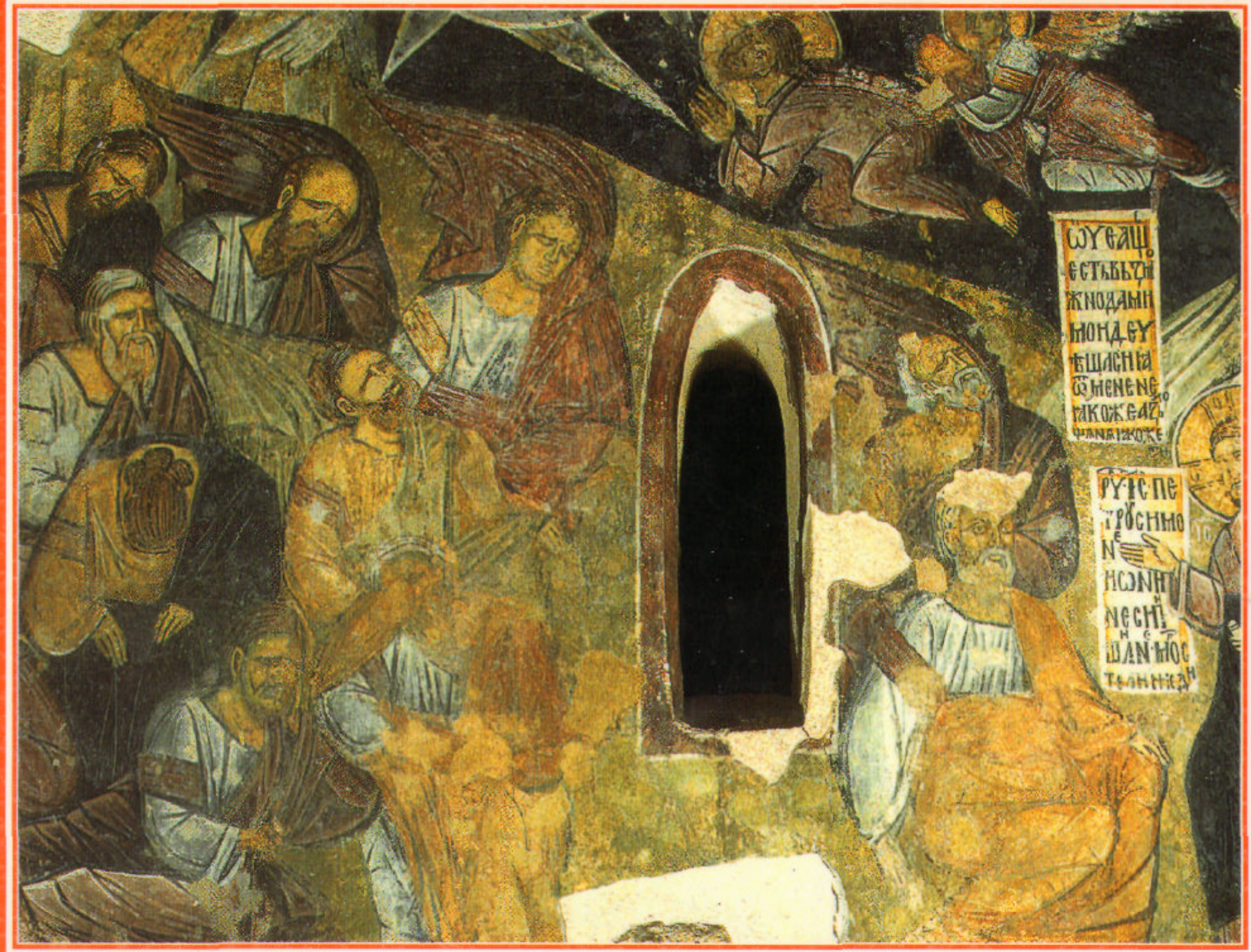
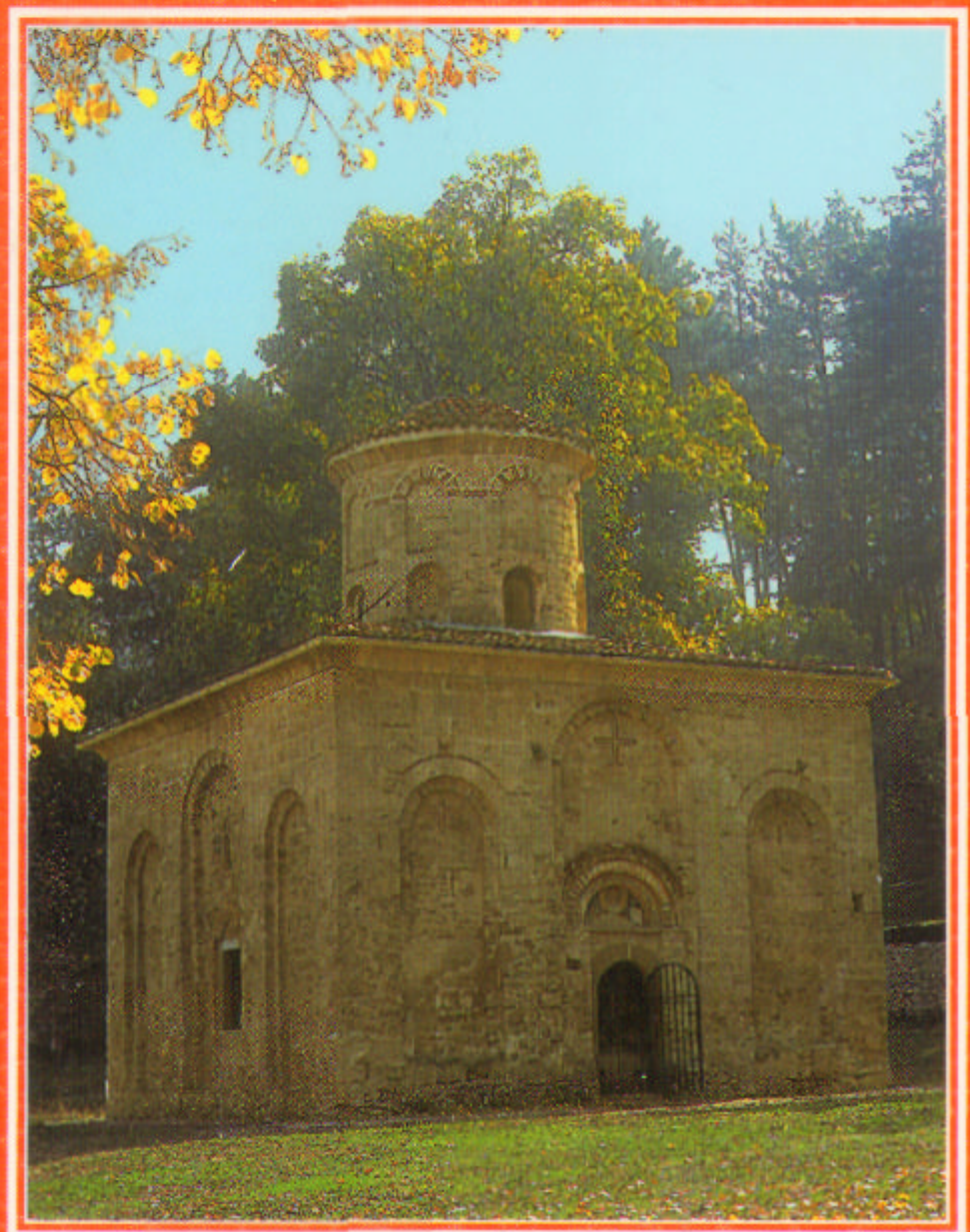
*Monk saints: Sabas of Jerusalem, Euthymius, Arsenius - western wall*

the master's apprentice who chose to give reservation to gesture and movement.

The blacksmiths' movements from The Forging of the Nails for the Cross are very realistic. The groups of the apostles in The Washing of the Feet, the Communion, The Dormition of the Virgin and The Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane are well composed as are most of the figures from the two lower tiers that probably the master painter painted. The two-dimensional aspect of the painting is best manifest with the garments. The dense hard dark brown line of the ovals of the faces, the silhouette, the drapes of the garments is one of the principal means of expression. The faces are not sharply individualized but lively, anyway. They look differently. The objects are painted realistically and thus show how the medieval Bulgarian lived. Stylistically and iconographically the Zemen church frescoes are attributed to the archaic trend in Bulgarian medieval painting where archaic elements were saved and continued to exist for some time. These frescoes differ from the official tendency in Bulgarian 13th-14th century painting and tend to the older archetype.

The Zemen church frescoes make it one of the most interesting examples of 14th century Bulgarian monumental painting. The church is on the list of national cultural monuments.





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